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RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 0339
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 0066
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RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO 0071
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 0034
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA 0326
RUEHSJ/AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE 0040
RUEHSN/AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR 0051
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO 0107
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SUBJECT: PORTUGAL CONCERNED BUT RESERVES JUDGMENT ON
CONSTITUTIONAL PROPOSALS

REF: SECSTATE 154674

Classified By: Dana M. Brown, Pol-Econ Officer, Embassy Lisbon
Reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Pol-Econ officer met with MFA Venezuela Desk Officer Leandro Amado to detail U.S. concerns regarding the Chavez government's proposed constitutional amendments, highlighting the potential risks to free speech, due process, and civil liberties. Amado acknowledged refTEL points and confirmed that many EU Member States share our concerns. Nevertheless, he reported that Portugal was awaiting further information on which reforms Chavez would present for final consideration and how those proposals could affect Venezuela's political and economic situation before responding. Amado stated that Portugal was being cautious about denouncing proposed measures because the GOV's actions have been in accordance with Venezuelan law, and because the Portuguese fear potential reprisals against Portuguese citizens in Venezuela (totaling around 500,000).

¶2. (C) Amado speculated that EU Member States, led by the UK, could issue a statement of concern in the near future if Member States reached a consensus. While Amado allowed that reforms "narrowed Venezuela's democracy," he claimed that the EU would have to review the causes prompting the constitutional reforms before taking action. Specifically, he went so far as to say the EU would factor in the Venezuelan opposition's boycott of last year's elections as it relates to Chavez's latest moves.

¶3. (C) Comment: Amado mostly offered a standard rehash of Portugal's non-confrontational approach to bilateral relations with Venezuela motivated primarily by concerns about the well-being of Portuguese citizens resident in Venezuela. We were struck, though, by Amado's implication that the opposition's election boycott was partly responsible for the latest developments, because it had ceded the political playing field to Chavez. In the end, Portugal will not issue its own public rebuke of Chavez, nor criticize the Venezuelan government privately in a bilateral demarche, but would likely fall into line if the EU agreed to common language critical of Chavez's efforts.

Ballard